



the ant
the action northeast trust

Crossing 9 – Almost 10 !

Almost ten years old. We ants enter the double digit years with mixed feelings. Childlike excitement about being 10 but also somewhat overwhelmed at being a decade old! One good thing about crossing a milestone is that it makes one sit back and exult at bygone years, and look forward to the years ahead. We at the ant are proud to present our tenth year's report. We thank each one of you for being a part of our journey. Assured of your support and good wishes, we are keenly heading into the future.

1.

Village Development

Our direct work to develop the villages in Chirang District continues to be the core of our being. Our village organizers are busy working in over 110 villages to organize women, children, youth and farmers to take charge of their own development.



a. Organizing Women

Jagruti Groups – Our oldest programme yet, we have been forming Jagruti Groups for a long time now. We introduced savings and credit to women in the area and were the first ones to say that the informal lending rates of 8-10% prevalent in villages, were far too high. When our groups offered internal loans at just one to two per cent a month, people thought they were ‘mad’. But we are glad that this ‘madness’ has paid off. Informal lending rates in our area have dropped over the years, though still high at

five per cent. This has brought huge relief to the poor who are crippled by the debt trap as they struggle to pay the high interest every month.

Though we have worked with self help groups, we feel that we have not realized their potential, and our Jagruti Groups, barring a few, have remained weak. We hope to correct this very soon and increase the women’s groups by eight to 10 times in the next few years. We have started federating some of the groups and hope to build up a strong platoon of women.

Jagruti Cycle Bank Our women’s cycle bank which lends cycles to women on easy monthly instalments, received a fillip this year. Shortlisted for an award for innovation in women’s empowerment, it gave us an opportunity to look closely at the programmes. We were amazed at the potential that we ourselves had not realized! The project starting with 40 bicycles given on loans; has resulted in the loans revolving five times over to reach a total of 200 bicycles. Even as this goes to print, with generous help from Caring Friends, Mumbai, we are adding another 200 cycles to the bank. There is no public transport in the villages, and it is inspiring to watch the change a cycle costing three thousand rupees can bring in the lives of the poor. It becomes a ‘family vehicle’ to fetch water, go to school, market, hospital, bank, meet government officials,



attend meetings or visit relatives and friends. Our cycle learning camps are joyous events much in demand. Women see in it an 'excuse' to take time out from the family, and learn something for themselves!

Furthermore, the cycle bank which we handled centrally at **the ant** – will now be decentralized. The Deosri cluster started a cycle bank chapter last year. The 100 per cent loan recovery rate was amazing – from an area where even getting one square meal regularly is a challenge for many families. It has raised expectation that our women's groups can handle the cycle bank chapters in the other three clusters too. It is an exciting phase for the cycle bank, and with the support of donors from Caring Friends, Mumbai we are dreaming of miles of mobile women.

Mahila Divas — This was the second year of decentralized Mahila Divas celebrations on International Women's Day. Last year being the first attempt, our cluster level teams groped their way around. But this

year, their confidence was palpable. Over 1500 women were mobilized for the four celebrations in the four clusters. The responsibilities shouldered by women – who were involved from planning to post-event cleaning – was splendid! To see leadership shared among our team members and the women caused satisfaction. In the coming years, it will be a challenge to prepare women from our villages to accomplish much more so that leadership can be devolved further into their hands.

In most of the clusters the joint effort of our teams and the women and collected enough contribution to match (and at times exceed) what **the ant** put in. Rice, vegetables, firewood, bamboo and cash came in from the women as usual but they also mobilized from the other community members through house-to-house collections. They even ventured into soliciting donations from shopkeepers in village bazaars, town markets and from community leaders! A fall out of this was that far more people learnt about International Women's Day than those



who attended the celebrations. The sustainability of such a mega event it seems, is slowly within reach.

b. Organizing Farmers

Farmers Resource Centre — Less than two years ago we started engaging with farmers. In this short time 400 farmers are actively engaged with us. Our six Farmers' Resource Centres (FRCs), supported by the Ford Foundation in different clusters, have conducted over 50 training programmes. As farmers in our area struggle with erratic rains, caused by climate change, they need support now more than ever. Farmers have been enthused with the farmer exposure programmes and new experiments in farming that the FRCs work on. The new methods of potato and vegetable cultivation have given them hope in the losing battle that is farming.

SRI Rice The amount of paddy in the house measures the food security for the household and we have been focusing on alternative methods of paddy farming. Having worked magic in many parts of the country and abroad, the SRI (System of Rice Intensification) method of paddy cultivation was something we were keen to try out. The sheer arrogance of the idea bewildered farmers! That paddy does not like a flooded field, and that a single stalk of paddy (and not a bunch planted together as in the traditional way) can actually survive to yield grains of rice defied belief. The first year, we managed to coax one or two very brave

farmers to try it out. The healthy growth of their paddy plants saw many disbelieving farmer-tourists coming from far and near to visit their fields! The next year, 40 intrepid farmers used the SRI method; more wish to wait-n-watch one more year. This paddy season we hope to grow it ten fold. Already 300 farmers are planning to try out the SRI method. And the message has spread to all the corners of our field area. We are crossing our fingers in the hope that rains behave and SRI flourishes for the sake of the small farmer.

Green is In — We have been promoting the use of chemical-free farming in our agricultural work. Whether it is SRI paddy or horticulture, the emphasis is on 'Going Green'. 185 farmers associated with us have stopped using chemical pesticides or chemical fertilizers. In place of these, they now use vermicompost from earthworms and have learnt to prepare their own organic pesticides. Even as this goes to print, we are negotiating a space to start our first organic shop. To be opened near the highway in Bongaigaon, we hope to throw open the market for organic products. We sure will have a number of interesting lessons to report next year.

Forming Farming Links — Getting the government back to the farms has been one of the most fulfilling part of our work with farmers. For years now, agricultural extension work in our area was unheard of.



ARJUN — THE ARDENT AGRICULTURALIST

With more and more young people turning away from farming, Arjun, a young but willing and enthusiastic farmer, is one of a rare breed indeed! Compared to the majority of marginal farmers owning less than two acres of land, Arjun's family, with 7 acres of land is one of the large-farm owning families of the area.

But gradually his production dropped. Excessive use of fertilizers made his land saline and pests attacked his crops no matter how much chemicals he sprayed. He was most enthusiastic when we first started talking of organic two years ago. Despite our asking him to go slow, he, in his enthusiasm, converted all his farming into organic. The change was too quick and his land too spoilt. Then, with organic manure hard to come by in the market and also expensive, Arjun suffered a loss in the first year. This scared him and he converted 50% of his land back to chemical farming.

He was desperate. Our team trained and helped him build a vermicomposting pit this year. His 3 chambered pit built with Rs. 8000 gave him 30 quintals of vermicompost last year of which he needed only half for his land. He sold vermicompost worth 6000 rupees to other farmers apart from saving 15,000 rupees which he would have otherwise spent on chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Arjun is now our best ambassador and has been busy encouraging other farmers to go in for organic farming.



BOKASHI JAP ANESE STYLE

Like most tribals, Bodos in our area have always farmed pigs and hens in their own traditional ways. If they were lucky, the animals survived to earn them some money. But most of the time, it was a gamble. Invariably, some bug would cause an epidemic wiping out entire broods, thus dealing a huge blow to poor families. This year we introduced Bokashi farming methods to minimize the risk and maximize chances of livestock survival.

The Bokashi farming method originated in Japan but is now popular in many parts of the world. The word bokashi means fermentation; bamboo vinegar and other micro-organisms are used to keep the floor clean naturally. It is also fed to the livestock to keep it free from diseases. With our support, two farmers have started demo units — one for rearing 100 chicken, and another for rearing pigs — using the Bokashi principles. The results are encouraging. It has effectively reduced labour cost, feed cost and even more important, improved sanitation — being smell-free and easy to clean. We are crossing our fingers! If the experiment works, it could change the face of livestock farming in our areas.

Even if they willed, agricultural officers had no clue about how to reach the farmers in the field. Years of militant violence kept the government away; later, the excuse became a convenience. But our team has changed that. Our work with farmers has created a channel for the flow of resources and schemes to farmers in remote areas in our

district. We had training programmes, subject matter specialists, pump machines, demo vermicompost tanks, certified seeds, integrated pest management training programmes and techniques etc. in a marvellous partnership with the government.

While we made the government extend its services to the villages, our own agricultural team has enthusiastically provided its own share of extension services too! New into this sector ourselves, we are learning fast. Our agricultural team members have become experts in their own right and are invited to train other NGOs and CBOs in different parts of Bodoland. Many a times they have gone as resource persons in programmes organized by the student unions on SRI and Organic Farming. Using training materials specially created for the purpose, our agricultural team hopes to reach out to many hundreds of farmers.

Livestock Support — Livestock is part and parcel of a farmer's life and farmers fall back on their livestock to exchange for cash in case of emergencies. The principal of a private school told us how a tribal farmer



offered him a piglet as he had no cash for his son's school fees! Hence, Support is essential to ensure economic security for farming families.

VACCINATION SERVICES For a change, the government veterinary department has been responsive and villagers are now getting to see livestock vaccination camps. For an understaffed department, what could be better than having an NGO organize the people and the cattle while they come on that day to push in the vaccine! A win-win situation for all? People get the service, NGO gets credibility while the government gets to tick this exercise off their list of things to do! But also knowing that the government vaccination services though useful would happen only once-in-a-rare-while, we have trained village level paravets to render regular vet services in our clusters – to our groups and to individual families with livestock. Some of our livestock farmers have been trained to help others too. Even as they look after their own animals, they also 'treat' the livestock of their fellow villagers for a small fee. More than any other intervention, we know that we have the best chances of securing livestock survival with these hands-on village based 'paravets'!

LIVESTOCK SUPPORT GROUPS — With a small capital, we supported 30 livestock farmers to take up various animal husbandry activities to augment their income. Their initial animals were bought with loans from us. The repayment was channelled into

future loans. However, the most useful service rendered by the livestock support groups is the veterinary service to the village.

c. Organizing Children

Last year, if we ants thought we were taking our first small steps towards working with children, the sheer number and range of activities in one year have turned it into a giant leap! Village level children's groups, setting up activity centres, summer camps, children's competitions, Bal melas, yuva yatras . . . Perhaps it is the inexhaustible



RANG TARANG SUMMER CAMPS

The highest of all high points this year has been our Summer Fun Camp for children in government schools. The July of 2009 will remain a very special one for many of our field staff. For one magical week they too turned into children as they danced, sang, acted, played, painted, shouted and screamed along with the children. Supported by Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi our friends from the Children's Resource Centre trained and hand-held our field staff and volunteers the entire way. Our 4 cluster level teams were thrilled to realize that it is possible to keep 500 children engaged for a week meaningfully. And as for the children, used to the boredom of government schools, they could not believe that learning can actually be so much fun! Summer holidays suddenly took on a new meaning for them. Even as this goes to print, our teams are again readying themselves for the second round of Rang Tarang Summer Camps in July 2010. This time we are getting ready to train young volunteers from the community to run the summer camps.

energy of children that drives us on. For the first time, we obtained a regular project to work with children when DKA, Austria came forward to help us in 'centering the child' in society's scheme of things.

Children's Groups — We have formed 32 children's groups involving 500-600 children. Right now we are busy holding meetings and negotiating with the villages to set up children's 'activity centres'. We envisage these as spaces in the villages where children can express themselves creatively; where coming together is a joyful and constructive experience. It is not an easy

task to get parents and elders in the village to understand why children need such spaces. Sending children to school is viewed as duty done.

The limp response from adults is more than made up by the fervour of the children! Days which the children had never heard of earlier such as Children's Day, Environment Day, Teachers' Day and Parents' Day are being celebrated with great colour and zeal in all our clusters. Even as children get involved, they are developing important planning and organizing skills. We are sure that our children's programme will take on an exceptional shape in the years to come.



Bal Melas & Yuva Yatras — This year too, our children from Chirang got a chance to visit Delhi. Thanks to the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML — Teen Murti Bhawan), 24 children from eight Government High Schools in Chirang District spent a week in Delhi in February. We ensured that children from all the 5 communities of our district — Adivasis,



Bengalis, Bodos, Nepalis and Koch Rajbongshis — were sent for this Bal Mela. Some of the children were seeing a town or a train for the first time in their lives and it was especially thrilling to experience the journey through their eyes.

The facilitators at NMML took them through a week of activities and sessions which included learning about Jawaharlal Nehru and his life, visit to a mosque-temple-church-gurdwara; visit to a school for physically challenged children and taking part in a science exhibition. The defining moment for all the children and accompanying adults — was seeing the Taj Mahal in Agra! Most of the 'Delhi-returned' children now volunteer when we organize programmes for children and youth in the villages.

Yuva Yatra: Children from Delhi in Chirang — We got a return visit from Delhi children a few months after our children went to Delhi. NMML organized a Yuva Yatra for 25 children from different schools in and around Delhi to our district Chirang. We were touched when parents despite knowing Assam's reputation 'dared' to send their kids here. The openness and liveliness of the children was also impressive as they took a peek into a world enormously different from the one they are familiar with. They could not believe that schools can have no teachers, that 230 children are actually enrolled in one class and that farmers' fields can remain dry despite heavy rains! Our village children and their families were also thrilled to host the

children in their homes and wanted them to stay longer. For all parties including our field staff, it was a huge learning opportunity.

Children's Competition — Our direct programmes can only reach out to a limited number of students. But we wanted more children to have a chance to take part in some creative activity in which they could express themselves. With a little bit of support from NMML, we initiated a Children's Competition for Chirang District in November 2009. Children could choose to draw, write an essay, write a letter to the President or even pen a poem on the topic 'The World We Want'. We managed 100 entries in all and gave away prizes in all categories. The quality of entries did not disappoint. Currently, we are planning to run a competition through the summer holidays in July 2010 once again.

WE ARE WILLING TO RETURN!

Knowing that people in Deosri hardly have any money, we were wary about starting any programme which requires repayment or revolving of the money given. It was with some trepidation that we started giving cycle loans in the area last year. Courage came from our donor Caring Friends of Mumbai assuring us that even losing the money is worth a try in such a needy area and this helped us take the risk. Two years down the line and the cycle bank still has a 100% recovery rate!

Not just the cycle bank but also the loans that our livelihood team has started giving for small businesses in Deosri have similar return rates. The loanees actually come to our office and return the loans on the prescribed date! In every other cluster of ours, our field staff has to collect the EMIs from the loanees! A HUGE lesson learnt for us — not just money but sincerity which pushes loan return. We are happy that our poor in Deosri have clearly thumbed their noses at us in this regard!

d. Organizing Forest Dwellers & IDPs

Our work with Internally Displaced Persons and forest dwellers in Deosri, for which we received support from Indo-Global Social Services Society (IGSSS) for a year continues. Our endeavour to help people in their struggle for food, land and water on the one hand, and the zeal (rightly so) of the forest department to preserve the forest, keeps us on a tightrope walk here. It is a chicken or egg question all the time. Should people be organized for their rights or should we introduce development activities to enable communities in their struggle for survival? One thing we are committed to, is to walk the journey with the communities there. The willingness of the different communities — be it Bodos, Nepalis, Rajbongshis or Santhalis — to be involved is what drives us on in Deosri.

e. Organizing for Health

Health is something which all of us desire but neglect till it is absent! The same holds good for our village communities. Till illness strikes, immediate concerns such as food, education and a roof overhead seem much more urgent than health. But knowing that money spent on treating illness has caused bankruptcy in poor families, we have pushed the health agenda even where the community appears hesitant. This is particularly true of our project to monitor the government's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).

(i) Community Monitoring of Health —

In the past year, our health team worked with 30 Village Health and Sanitation Committees (VHSCs) in Chirang District in emboldening them to keep a vigilant eye on the quality of government health services. These committees are trained to carry out Facility Checks at the health centres. We also help them prepare report cards which are then presented in public dialogues in front of government officials. A perceptible difference in the quality of services between areas where the community monitoring process has been initiated and where it has not, has given satisfaction over our endeavour. With our donor, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, U.K further extending their support to our health project for another two years, we are sure that we will be able to deepen community monitoring and make quality health to the poor a reality. We have doubled the number of villages where we operate community monitoring and now the programme reaches out to 60 villages. That another NGO has taken over the monitoring work which we had started in the neighbouring Kokrajhar District, freeing us to concentrate in Chirang, is encouraging news too. Along with Centre for Health and Social Justice (New Delhi), we will also be starting a process of budget monitoring in some villages where people will be taught strategies to monitor how health budgets are utilized.

(ii) Mental Health Services — The fact that the attendance of patients in our

monthly mental illness treatment camps jumped from 482 last year (2008-09) to more than double at 1128 patients in 2009-10 speaks volumes about the need for mental health services in our area. And the numbers continue to grow. Our monthly camp now sees an average of 150 patients while our budget from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation allows us medicines for 125 patients! It is a tight squeeze but in the absence of any care for mental illnesses, deft management of the programme keeps us going.

It is shocking that almost 40 per cent of the patients attending our camps suffer from epilepsy, which often accompanies later by mentally illness. Their seizures should be simple to manage, and can easily be treated at government dispensaries. But ignorance and the sheer callousness of the system has aggravated many cases of simple seizures into those of mental illness thereby destroying their lives. We are trying to advocate the government to keep medicines for epilepsy available at the government dispensaries besides nudging doctors to prescribe them. We know this small step will relieve the suffering of many so called 'mental' patients.

We Need Mental Health Services !

As an NGO we know we cannot provide services forever and ever. We have proven that there is a huge demand. Also demonstrated that mental illness can be cured. The government needs to take over from here. Our advocacy for such services has been gentle so far. Perhaps there is a



MENTAL NO MORE

Jarao Basumatary of Tinglangguri village on the Bhutan border went mad with worry after her husband was arrested for cutting firewood in the jungle. A daily wage labourer herself, her anxiety over her family's fate drove her over the edge. Jarao became so violent that she attacked her family members and other villagers, even biting off the finger of her little daughter.

Upset, angry and frustrated, villagers beat her up and broke her hand and leg. They then chained her to a tree. Our field workers immediately informed our health team on learning of this. We rushed to her with medication, and counselled both the community and family. She is continuing medication, is well and functions as a daily wage labourer as before.

need for stridency. But after our complaints of the absence of mental health services, in principle, the NRHM office in Guwahati has agreed to allocate resources for supplying medicines to treat mental illnesses, at the district level. Though yet to fructify, this response has give us hope. In the meantime, we have started organizing family support groups in the different clusters. We hope the families will be of support to each other and also become pressure groups for demanding treatment for their family members from the government.

2. Aagor – the weaver ants

Aagor Daagra Afad, our weaving outfit, seems to have reached a plateau in its growth which had been phenomenal in the initial few years. Our 71 lakhs rupees of sales this year was higher than last year's sales but less than what we sold two years ago. In all, we paid wages worth 23 lakhs and salaries worth 5 lakhs rupees to the women weavers and local staff respectively. And it was a relief that *aagor* moved back to the black after booking losses for the first time last year. But the performance is far from satisfactory. The next year will be a crucial make or break year for the *aagor* team.

The loan taken from the bank for working capital has been one of the biggest mill stones around *aagor*'s neck. We have to pay an interest of 40 to 50 thousand rupees every month as our biggest customers do not pay timely! We are also unable to lower our loans to less

than 50 or 55 lakhs at any point of time. Though payment is promised within four to six weeks of delivery, it never materializes. This year, we delivered clothes to the biggest names in the handloom retail sector in India in end-August 2009 but till 31st March 2010, they had still not paid up the bulk of the money. We faulted at our end too as we could deliver only three weeks after the agreed date mainly because of delay in getting quality yarn all the way from Tamil Nadu, and also because of the delays by the poorest women in our area who weave from their homes. But to use the excuse to penalize a small women-run enterprise by delaying their payments by months together seems insensitive. We are in a business and we are learning to lump it. But yes, the bank interest is bleeding *aagor* dry and as we have no money to take further orders, it is hurting our



WHO IS MORE BUREAUCRATIC GOVERNMENT OR NON-GOVERNMENT?!

For many years now *aagor* has been supplying to Trifed — a government marketing outfit with branches in all state capitals. Knowing how the government agencies work, we were prepared for huge delays in payment and loads of paperwork. But their helpful attitude does not stop to surprise us. Even though they keep lesser margins than the private players, we have been paid within a month of delivery — 100% of the time!

Compare this to our dealing with one of the newer names in private handloom retail sector in India. It has been six months since we completed one of their orders but yet to receive a single paisa! We go repeatedly to their offices with our files but somehow never manage to complete all their paper work even as *aagor*'s clothes are cleaned off from their shelves! Another big retailer took eight months to pay our dues because our delivery was late by one month! A grievous punishment indeed.

weavers deeply. Despite challenges, *aagor* will continue to fight — pushed by the fact that money from weaving helps some of our weavers and their families keep the wolves of hunger at bay. This brutal fact will push *aagor* to meet its challenges.

Rehabilitating Housemaids

Three batches of our Maid Servant Rehab programme went through our process once again this year. The twenty girls who are selected from a waiting list get a chance to weave to their heart's content. The highest money earned this year was Rs. 17000 by one weaver alone in the four months of their programme. Their four

months with us allows them to not just earn sufficient money to return their family loans and get back to life but also allows them to learn reading and writing. Besides exposing them to a variety of livelihood opportunities and teaching skills like cycling.

This programme, which Ford Foundation helped us start and is still supporting, has become very popular with the housemaids. Fourteen batches and around 260 housemaids have completed the programme till now. Though it's impossible to follow up each and every woman — as they come from just about anywhere — we estimate, from a small sample study, that around 70 per cent of them would have been rehabilitated and not being compelled to reverting to their domestic help status. For those of us who stay on campus, music means to wake up to the rhythmic sound of the thak-thak-thak from the looms of our weavers and also to one particular Aamir Khan song from a CD which they insist on starting the day with!



3. IDeA – the trainer ants

Set up with an objective of creating a space for the voluntary sector in the northeast, IDeA — the Institute of Development Action — is now three years old. The past year's calendar was an impressive one for the institute. We conducted a total of 26 in-house courses of three to five days each on various topics such as NGO management, project development, facilitation skills, perspective building course on development, using the rights based approach, effective SHGs, malaria, community health, and research methodology. There has been much appreciation from the participants for the quality of the courses we offered. They have ranked it very high. But the number of

cancellations — many a times after confirmation — has been baffling. It was hard to fathom why NGOs confirm their arrival for a particular course the evening before but fail to finally show up the next day! We are working on ways to crack this issue. Then, even though the courses have been helpful in building up individual skills of its personnel, we recognize the limitations of short courses in helping small NGOs develop or move ahead. We have realized that smaller NGOs need a longer time to build capacity and for hand-holding, before they can stand on their own. To address this need, with support from Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust, Mumbai for next year, we are designing a six-month long course (broken



EXPANDING ELBOW SPACE

The voluntary sector in the northeast region has very little space for action. Where the political atmosphere is volatile, a government with no understanding of NGO work; powerful traditional bodies and youth organizations that dictate what may or may not happen; a largely armchair media that also finds itself vulnerable by exposing the truth; the lack of enough committed and daring funding agencies – NGOs in the region are pitted against many odds and feel hemmed in from many sides. In order to think of ways to expand this space for the sector, the ant under the aegis of IDeA, organized a two day seminar in Guwahati in January this year.

We were truly humbled by the positive response we got from almost every single distinguished speaker we approached for the sessions. It was a pity that illness and other unforeseen circumstances forced some of them to cancel their attendance at the last minute. We sorely missed them but could feel their blessings towards the process. Among the organizations represented from various parts of the northeast a majority was from Manipur and Assam – two states where NGOs are a legion. The five areas we took to create and expand elbow space – with the government, in traditional institutions, in the media, among youth organizations, and with funding agencies, were well appreciated. Many participants felt that some of the issues discussed at the seminar were being spoken of publically for the first time. Others felt that we NGO people should invest more time talking about issues that concern our own health! For the team at the ant and IDeA, this being the first seminar ever organized, it was a leap in learning. We may still not know how best to hold an awesome seminar but we certainly learnt which mistakes to obviate!

up into small modules) for shoring up the capacities of NGOs. They can be linked to resource organizations later.

Apart from courses which we conduct regularly, we have also managed to plan a number of outreach courses for different institutions. Even as we ran training programmes for the staff of other NGOs, our faculty was also invited to teach social work students of different institutes in Assam.

Health Diary Re-run

After a gap of 6 years we re-launched our Health Diary and what a triumphant return it turned out to be. We sold 3000 copies of the diary, 1200 of it to the National Rural Health Mission in Assam and most of the rest to government agencies at the Centre or in other states. It has helped reach out our message and politics of health to a much

larger number. This response has made us ambitious. A Hindi, and maybe even an Assamese version this year for the many health workers and Ashas who need a handy source to refer to, is on the anvil.



4. The Ants Craft Trust – the tradition crafting ants

It is two and a half years since we opened our craft store in Bangalore. It has been a roller coaster ride for Smitha and Pradeep, our designers and store managers. Attractive in parts yet scary in others. While retail sales in the shop need a boost, the café does well and draws in a good crowd. It helps subsidize the rent and sundry expenses. While we mull over ways of getting the shop on its feet, some developments are taking place. Most exciting is news of **the ant** craft store in Bangalore being registered separately as The Ants Craft Trust. We cleaved it off and registered it as a separate entity in December 2009. The new trustees have been meeting often to figure out ways to help the shop return its loans and flourish.



NORTHEASTISING BANGALORE

Why can't the northeast be more like us? This is a constant refrain of people in mainstream India baffled by the Northeast. The complex issues, the unreasonable demands, the differences that continue to defy set stereotypes are discomfiting for many. But many of us in the northeast feel that there is enough beauty and strength in our differences which is not understood by the mainstream. There is a need to correct this misperception . . . for Northeastising the Mainstream . And, we started this work in January this year, thanks to the Foundation for Social Transformation, a new funding agency set up by the North East Network in Guwahati.

At the ant s Bangalore store, book readings, film screenings, musical evenings, food fests and discussions take place almost every week. Our first event had Moji Riba, a film-maker based in Arunachal Pradesh, showing documentary films by Northeastern film-makers, and leading an interesting discussion. With Naga and Mizo food festivals, discussions and book readings lined up, it will be great to observe those attending these events gain new insights into our much maligned northeast region.



5. **Gramin Vikas Samiti – the business growing ants**

Gramin Vikas Samiti or GVS is the latest baby of **the ant**. For years our EDP programme aimed at creating self employment through encouraging micro-enterprises. To date, the programme has trained and given loans to 210 individuals and 35 groups to establish their businesses. For some years now we had handed over all assets and decision making on loans and investments to a committee comprising some influential community members, also part of **the ant**'s advisory committee. The general feeling was that the EDP programme was far too small and needed acceleration. The new finance laws of the government disabled this under the umbrella of **the ant** without adversely affecting us. Hence, in February 2010, in consultation with community members, we pushed our EDP programme a step towards independence by registering as a separate trust called Gramin Vikas Samiti (GVS — a name chosen by the committee). The GVS team has finally placed their accounts for auditing. Once this is through, financial institutions will be approached for loans to promote entrepreneurship in our area.



THE BUSINESS OF BUILDING LIVES

For three years, Minoti Brahma of our Mongolian Cluster helped her husband in pushing a handcart (thela) for a living. She dreamt of starting her own business and becoming an entrepreneur. A one-day orientation workshop of ours on starting micro enterprises which she joined, put her on the road to realization. She took a small first loan of 3000 rupees to sell vegetables at the Mongolian Bazaar. In six months time, Minoti had repaid her loan. She then took successive loans of 4000 and 5000 rupees. GVS is thrilled that Minoti is now a successful entrepreneur, making a monthly profit of 5000 rupees!



Ravindrabhai Upadhyay (1923-2010) passed away on 12th April after a prolonged battle with Fibrosing Alveolitis that had devoured his lungs. Ravindrabhai, as he was lovingly called, in his youth believed that only violence could evict the British, but Gandhi's assassination turned him around. Hailing from Buxar in Bihar, Ravindrabhai had been working in Bihar until 1962 when he, along with his wife and many other Sarvodaya workers volunteered to start the Shanti Sena in the then NEFA hills. Thereafter, he started the Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh – based on Vinoba's concept of people surrendering their personal land for collective ownership, and consequently, none of the farmers in these villages has ever lost his land, despite adverse circumstances – near the Bhutan Border, about one and a half hours from Guwahati. TAGS is a thriving Khadi institution besides being a learning centre where many of his trainees have left to form institutions of their own, many of them deservedly enjoying his attention and visits every year. He was awarded the Padmashri and the Jamnalal Bajaj award for social work, besides many other awards.

Very active right until his last month, Ravindrabhai and his wife impressed everyone with their austere and frugal lifestyle, simplicity and self-deprecatory honesty, which could often be brutal. His guidance helped us a lot and he stood behind us like a rock in difficult times. We miss his tall erect frame, his smiling welcome and even more so, his wise counsel as our founder trustee!

OUR WORK

If we were just two little hesitant ants in 2000, we are now a thriving anthill. This dwelling has five distinct branches of work:

- | | | |
|------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I. | Village Development | the mobilizer ants |
| II. | Aagor | the weaver ants |
| III. | IDeA | the trainer ants |
| IV. | The Ants Craft Trust | the tradition crafting ants |
| V. | Gramin Vikas Samiti | the business growing ants |



the ant

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the ants' INVOLVEMENT AT HIGHER LEVELS



Let's interpret this as an affirmation of our expertise: we were called twice for consultation by the Planning Commission — once for improving the health sector and then later, for suggesting improvements in the handicrafts sector of the country. The Union Health Ministry also sought our advice regarding inputs for mother and child health programmes.

At the regional level, when all the eight northeast states were to present their plans and budgets to the Union Health Ministry in February, we were asked to sit in on all the eight presentations over four days. Also given the first right to react!

For the Unique Identity Authority of India, we organized a consultation of academia in Gauhati University, Guwahati and of members of the civil society of northeast for a better understanding and dissemination of UID issues.

Thanks to Our Funders

- **The Ford Foundation, New Delhi** – for your continued and unstinting support. Your role in building up *the ant* as a strong and worthy institution can never be acknowledged enough.
 - **Caring Friends, Mumbai** – for living up to their name. It sure feels good to be cared for.
 - **DKA, Austria** – for trusting even without really knowing us. We are truly humbled.
 - **Paul Hamlyn Foundation, New Delhi** for your second grant. This enabled us to both deepen and expand the scope of our health work.
 - **FST, Guwahati** for helping us launch our dream project, that is of sensitizing the mainstream about the northeast.
 - **IGSSS, Guwahati** for supporting our rights work with the marginalized, even if the journey was brief.
 - **NFI, New Delhi** for proving committed partners. You have walked a long way with us. Thanks for believing in our idea of IDeA!
 - **SDTT, Mumbai** for your support to IDeA in reaching out and founding a strong voluntary sector in this region.
- Heartfelt thanks to you all who donated in this financial year.
- AB Paul, Amber Equitable Inv't Ltd, Angela & Tarun, Asha Kaul, Col Ashok Sinha, Dr Rajeev Singh, Dr Sandip Mathur, Gajen Brahma, Jamuna Ramakrishna, Jayashree Ramakrishna, Kiran Gupta, Manish Kumar, Manju, Mukund, Naresh Mehta, Neela D Souza, Neha & Sachin, Nihit & Preeti, Nimesh Shah, Optimum Stock Trading Co., Prachee & Prasanna, Vishal Shah
- We wish to thank *the ant*'s local Advisory Committee for their unflinching stand despite the odds that face them.
- Special thanks to Krishan Kalsi and *stet* – the Media People, New Delhi. Our Health Diary saw the light of day because of you. We acknowledge you as being our de facto office in Delhi!

For donors in the USA, please contact www.arpanfoundation.org for Sec 501 benefits and to see if your employer gives a matching donation to double your contribution.

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